

## A Brief Overview of the Psalms

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In the last chapter, I explored the findings of 107 preachers' homiletical relationships to the psalms. Even though the preachers find great spiritual value in the Psalms, they preach them less frequently than other texts. From there, I spoke briefly about the great gift that the Psalms have to offer, as well as the challenges that the psalms hold for preachers and hearers. A few sentences from the respondents are worthy of mention at this point:

- Congregation doesn't usually pay attention to the Psalm, so much time is spent bringing them on board.
- I find preaching on the Psalms something that doesn't even occur to me.
- This may sound weird, but I find it easier to teach/lecture on the Psalms that I do preaching on them.

What makes the approach to the Psalms a challenge? Why does it take so much time to bring people "on board" with the psalms? Why might they be more suitable for a teaching or lecturing context? A simple response might be that the psalms are complicated. Brueggemann says that "the psalms are a strange literature to study."<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter echoes Brueggemann's sentiment by writing that the psalms' connections to the late Bronze Age (1600-1200 BCE) renders them "quite alien to most modern people."<sup>2</sup> I agree that the Psalms are strange and alien to most modern people because they point us to a time and context so far removed from our

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (St. Paul, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*. Translated by Robert Alter. First Edition (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2007), xiii.

current time and lifestyle that many would consider them irrelevant — how could something written so long ago be applicable to life today? For the purposes of this curriculum, some basic information about the unfamiliar world of the Psalms will make clearer some of the basic challenges to interpretation and preaching.

We begin with a most basic question: what is a psalm? Bellinger writes that “the word *psalm* is a transliteration of the Greek word referring to a song performed to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.”<sup>3</sup> Jacobson writes that the psalm is a biblical poem. It finds its meaning in the Hebrew word *mizmor*, which is translated “song.”<sup>4</sup> A psalm, then, is a biblical song or poem. The collection of this type of art, or poetic expression, is known as the Psalter — a “collection of Hebrew Poetry”<sup>5</sup> — that was originally titled (from the Hebrew) “Book of Praises.”<sup>6</sup> If the Psalms, then, are art, and if the interpretation of art isn’t a first language for most people, then the Psalms are already at a disadvantage. An exploration of this poetic layer is in order. A basic understanding of Hebrew poetry is necessary for any fruitful exploration and interpretation of the Psalms.

### **The Psalms as Poetry**

The psalms are a conversation between humanity and God. Brueggemann writes “the Book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us

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<sup>3</sup> W.H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter*. 2nd Ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Rolf A Jacobson and Karl N Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader’s Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, *Invitation*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Bellinger, *Psalms*, 7.

in the biblical tradition . . . The Psalms are helpful because they are a genuinely dialogical literature that expresses both sides of the conversation of faith.”<sup>7</sup>

How do the psalmists choose to communicate this great conversation between humanity and God? They turn to poetry.

From a *New York Times* article: “Do you remember, as I do, how in the classroom poems were so often taught as if they were riddles? What is the poet *really* trying to say here? What is the theme or message of this poem? What does this word “purple” or “flower” or “grass” *really* mean? Like classical music, poetry has an unfortunate reputation for requiring special training and education to appreciate, which takes readers away from its true strangeness, and makes most of us feel as if we haven’t studied enough to read it.”<sup>8</sup>

I agree with this author. Poetry does have a reputation for requiring special training to appreciate. In the case of interpreting the Psalms for preaching, the preacher may steer clear because she worries that she does not have the skills for interpreting such a complex and specific genre of poetry. True, a basic understanding of the psalm genre and context are important, but just as important is spending time with the psalm and the psalmist. As any piece of poetry (art) needs to be held in the heart and the mind in order to mine the wisdom that is beneath the surface, so the preacher must patiently and with curiosity hold the Psalms. More will be said about this when I discuss how a mindfulness meditation practice can offer preachers that time of “holding” the Psalms.

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<sup>7</sup> Breuggemann, *Spirituality*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Zapruder, “Poetry: Pick a Word, Any Word,” *New York Times*, Sunday, July 16, 2017.

“Why are the psalms written in poetry?” asks Nancy deClaisse-Walford in her *Introduction to the Psalms*.<sup>9</sup> She continues, “Our world is full of prose. We are bombarded daily with words – words that inform, instruct, guide, dictate, and attempt to persuade us. We become numb to the bombardment, and we tune out; we ignore. But when we encounter poetry, something happens to us; we tune in; we listen; we remember.”<sup>10</sup> It’s no wonder, then, that the psalmists were intentional about capturing their experiences with God, not through prose, but poetry. Robert Alter tells us “the psalms, at least in the guise of cultic hymns, were a common genre throughout the ancient Near East.”<sup>11</sup> He continues, “these ancient makers of devotional and celebratory poems were keenly aware that poetry is the most complex ordering of language, and perhaps the most demanding.”<sup>12</sup> Poetry, then, can be seen as a primary part of the strangeness to which Brueggemann refers. As poetry, the psalmists extend their own, unique invitation to experience life with God. As Ellen Davis writes “The poets who composed [the psalms] thought differently about God than we ordinarily do, and more deeply.”<sup>13</sup> Poetry helps the psalmists express their unique and deep thoughts about God. Poetry also helps us embrace and explore the uniquely deep relationship into which God has called us.

The Psalms have a spiritual dimension into which we are called, but they also have a technical dimension. The Psalms are not simply poetry, but ancient poetry of another culture and time. The distinctive task of interpreting this poetry is articulated by Jacobson who says that

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, Nancy L. *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>10</sup> deClaisse-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Bellinger, *Psalms*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Wonderous Depth*, 26.

“poetry, as a whole, is a type of language that has a different governing logic from other types of writing. And Hebrew poetry, in particular, has an even more specifically different set of governing logic.”<sup>14</sup> These ancient Hebrew poets were adhering to the poetic conventions of ancient Near Eastern culture. In addition to ancient poetic devices such as “repetition, wordplay, ambiguity, and figures of speech,”<sup>15</sup> a most recognizable aspect of Hebrew poetry is parallelism — recognizable, that is, once you learn how to look for it.

Parallelism is a way of forming connections within lines, within verses, within psalms, or even across different psalms. In traditional English poetry, we look for the familiarity of rhythm and rhyme. A common characteristic in Hebrew poetry is how “the sense of thought determines the poetic form.”<sup>16</sup> These ancient poets make connections by referring to previous lines, words, or concepts. They are taking their ideas further. Rolf and Karl Jacobson ask in the title of the first chapter of their reader’s guide to the Psalms, “Why is my Bible Repeating Itself?”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it may sound like the poets are saying the same thing over and over again. Actually, though, the poets are building on what has been previously said. As Jacobson explains, they are “extending” or “echoing” a thought. One element is introduced. The psalmist, then, either chooses to repeat the element or thought (echo), or take the thought further, adding additional information (extending). A good example can be found in Psalm 103.

- (A) The Lord is gracious and merciful\*
- (B) Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (verse 4)

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<sup>14</sup> Jacobson, *Invitation*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Bellinger, *Psalms*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobson, *Invitation*, 7.

The psalmist tells us in line A that the “Lord is gracious.” What does it mean for the Lord to be gracious? It means that the Lord is “slow to anger” (line B). The psalmist tells us that the Lord is merciful (line A). What does it mean for the Lord to be merciful? It means that the Lord is “abounding in steadfast love” (line B). For a very thorough and clear explanation of the use of parallelism in the Psalms, see Jacobson’s section on Understanding Parallelism.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the subtleties of the Hebrew poetry are lost, however, in our English translations. Unless we can speak Biblical Hebrew, it is easy to overlook the intended rhythms, beats, or other poetic devices utilized in any given psalm. It’s easy to speed through the subtle connections of thought that the poet is trying to make. We can, nonetheless, see that there is a look and feel to the psalms — they are not prose. Once a preacher understands the nuances of parallelism, the preacher can pick up on places of emphasis and where thought is being extended or echoed. These are the places about which the psalmist is saying, “Look here! Pay attention to this!” The psalmist is seeking to present, re-present, and make a claim about life with God, and the psalmist seeks to do it in a deep and meaningful way — as poetry — poetry about the struggles, joys, and confusion of encountering God. Now that we have some insights into the poetic nature of the Psalms, it is important to explore what circumstances gave birth to this poetry.

### **The Psalms as History**

Who wrote the Psalms? Most artists and professionals in the twenty-first century are quite concerned with intellectual property. Current artists expect credit for what they have imagined, painted, or published. Current authors want the world to know what they have created.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacobson, *Invitation*, 9-20.

This was not the case of the composers of the psalms. Nancy DeClaisse-Walford writes that “when we talk about literature from the ancient Near East, we are missing the seemingly-important dimension of authorship. Almost all of the literary works of the ancient Near East that have been discovered are anonymous. They are not signed, and no named authors take credit for them.”<sup>19</sup> There were no printing presses. Rather, texts were copied and passed through the hands of many generations with no concern about “who wrote it first.”<sup>20</sup> While modern worshippers might assume (according to tradition) that David wrote many of the psalms, we do not know, in fact, that this is true. The superscriptions that we see in our Bibles today will lead most readers, understandably, to believe that certain psalms were written by David (Psalms 51-65), or have some connection to the Korahites (Psalms 43-49) or to the temple musician Asaph (Psalm 50). But the Hebrew reference is not clear. The preposition “of” used in the superscription “a psalm of David,” for example, “has a broad range of meanings: to, for, in relation to, in behalf of, belonging to.”<sup>21</sup> While it would be helpful to pinpoint the authors, we cannot. This may seem like an interpretive obstacle, but this lack of specific authorship might free the preacher to think about her/himself more easily as the author. “What if this were me?” the preacher now has permission to ponder in a more expansive way. In being unable to put a face to a name and a name to a psalm, perhaps the preacher can engage the imagination more effectively and approach the psalm more personally and creatively.

Dating the psalms is difficult. Just as we are uncertain of specific authors, we are also uncertain of specific dates. “The one safe conclusion,” writes Alter, “is that the writing of the

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<sup>19</sup> Walford, *Introduction*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>21</sup> Bellinger, *Psalms*, 10.

psalms was a persistent activity over many centuries . . . a few of the poems appear to have been written at some indeterminate point during the four centuries of the First Commonwealth (996-586 BCE). Many others offer evidence in their themes and language of composition in the period of the Return to Zion (that is, after 457 BCE).” “These poems, then,” writes Alter, “were produced by many different poets over more than half a millennium, probably beginning during or even before the tenth century BCE, though the precise dating of most individual psalms remains elusive.”<sup>22</sup> This means that for some 400-500 years, people of faith wrote poetry that was dedicated to their experiences with Yahweh and the emotions that those experiences called forth. As Patrick Miller explains, “In other words the psalms give speech to human response and human existence before God (Coram Deo). Furthermore, life before God and in response to God is fully open and unrestricted. So it is that the psalms range through the gamut of experiences (disaster, war, sickness, exile, celebration, marriage, birth, death) and emotions (joy, terror, reflections, gratitude, hate, contentment, depression.)”<sup>23</sup> They observe and express what was going on around them and within them. I will say more about these responses and their relationship to meditation later in this thesis.

What is important about this historic poetry is that in it, the psalmists model, then and now, humankind’s attempt to make sense out of this new and emerging relationship with the one God. As Brueggemann suggests, the psalms are not about God addressing us, the psalms are, “rather, the voice of our own common humanity — gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity.”<sup>24</sup> The psalmists’

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<sup>22</sup> Alter, *Book of Psalms*, xvi.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 15.

historical voice are most given contemporary expression in our current rhythms and practices of worship and prayer. As many of the psalms were written for use in the worship of ancient Israel, so the Psalms, today, continue to give voice to our movement through the seasons of the church year and through our own journeys of faith.

We are uncertain of the specific ways in which the Psalms were used in worship. Our own current worship practices of singing or chanting the psalms in creative ways are attempts at capturing the sung nature of the psalms, but scholars are unclear as to how they were presented in Temple worship. There is evidence, though, that the Psalms were performed by temple singers and musicians with instruments such as the timbral, the flute, and the lyre. They were written for specific liturgical purposes such as the celebration of “a national victory” or “for God’s intercession in a time of national danger.”<sup>25</sup> Many psalms have a more individual, personal focus, such as those that ask for deliverance from danger, or those that ask God to settle a score with enemies. The psalms range from the liturgically formal (Ps 118) to the reflective and vulnerable (Ps 131). They are a collection of private thoughts turned public for the sake of making their journey with their God more real and expressive for all who hear and experience them. For this reason, the Psalms have come to us through the voices of history as “a multifaceted poetic form serving many different purposes, some cultic and others not, and that played a vital role in the life of the Israelite community and of individuals within that community throughout the biblical period.”<sup>26</sup> The preacher today, like most worshippers, may have lost sight of the Psalms as the spiritually and emotionally packed, creative expressions that they were

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<sup>25</sup> Alter, *Book of Psalms*, xvii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., xviii.

intended to be. I will speak later about how this curriculum will help preachers reclaim this powerful aspect of the Psalms.

### **Why and how did they survive? The Shaping of the Psalter**

Eventually, 150 psalms were gathered, curated, and divided into five books based on connections within the individual psalms. DeClasse-Walford explains that by the Second Temple period (515 B.C.E), “these prayers and songs of ancient Israel were collected and ordered into the book we call the Psalms and placed within the canon of scripture.”<sup>27</sup> This collection that we call the Book of Psalms was even a part of the landscape of our Gospel writers and was “considered such a cornerstone of the scriptural canon that in Luke 24:44 it is mentioned together with the Torah and the Prophets as of the three primary categories of the sacred writings.”<sup>28</sup> The psalms helped the people of Israel remember what they had been through, who they were, and, most importantly, how God was present and faithful.

The Psalter, then, was a multi-useful collection of story, song, and poetry that functioned on a micro and a macro level. Its larger shape served as a “story of identity and existence for the postexilic community.”<sup>29</sup> But if we look into the individual psalms, we’ll hear the stories of individuals and communities who are carefully putting language and emotion to their experiences. The psalmists are crafting language that, to this very day, is used to help people of faith make sense of the landscape around them, particularly the landscape that is, unexpectedly or otherwise, occupied by God.

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<sup>27</sup> deClasse-Walford, *Introduction*, 5

<sup>28</sup> Alter, *Book of Psalms*, xvi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

## Psalm Genres or Types

Another important element in accessing, interpreting, and preaching the psalms is knowing the different genres, or types, of psalms. Knowing the genre and a bit about the genre will give the preacher great insight into what that particular psalm was intended to “do.” The psalm, itself, is a genre of Hebrew poetry. Within the Psalms genre are sub-categories or types — each of which has something to say, a way of saying it, and an audience who is to receive the message. Psalms can be grouped according to both form and content. “Form” refers to the way that the psalm is structured. It has specific parts and patterns that give this type of psalms its particular form. There are three categories of psalms based on form: Psalms of Lament; Hymns of Praise; Psalms of Trust. The form for these three genres includes a situation, an audience, a way of using language in a particular way. Psalms are also categorized based on content. These psalms are connected through themes about the poet’s encounter or experience with God and the world. Of course, different scholars will have different ways of categorizing according to theme, as some psalms have overlapping themes. Jacobson offers a useful list of thematic categories that give the preacher a clear sense of the poetic, situational and theological intention of the psalm: royal psalms, enthronement psalms, wisdom psalms, creation psalms, historical psalms, zion psalms, imprecatory psalms, penitential psalms, liturgical psalms.<sup>30</sup> Jacobson says that “the competent reader of the psalms is able to identify what genre a particular psalm is, which thus enables the reader to understand the meaning of the words that occur in that psalm.” The competent preacher will also be able to identify the genre of the psalm. In knowing the genre, the preacher is able to glimpse the world and the mind of the psalmist. More will be said about this process of mindful exploration in Chapter III.

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<sup>30</sup> Jacobson, *Invitation*, 64-86.

## Brueggemann's Framework

In the previous section, I briefly explored the ways that Psalms can be categorized or divided into sub-groups based on being similarly structured (form) or similarly themed (content). There are other ways of thinking about how the Psalms relate to each other — other lenses through which to see their connections. Perhaps the most useful way to think about a psalm is to explore what a psalm “does.” What is its function? In the pulpit, I often find myself asking these questions on behalf of the congregation: but what do we “do” with this piece of scripture? How can we apply this to our life today? How will this scripture serve us, our community, our relationships?

Eugene Peterson speaks of prayers as tools. Only, these tools — prayers — aren’t about doing; they are about “being and becoming.”<sup>31</sup> The Psalms, he says, “are the requisite toolbox. The Psalms are the best tools available for working the faith — one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers . . . People of faith take possession of the Psalms with the same attitude and for the same reason that gardeners gather up rake and hoe on their way to the vegetable patch, and students carry paper and pencil as they enter a lecture hall. It is a simple matter of practicality — acquiring the tools for carrying out the human work at hand.” Peterson suggests that being human is, indeed, work. We get so focused on the “nine to five” expressions of work with its overtime, insurance concerns and cranky bosses, that we forget that just being human is work enough, and this work of being human involves the slow, steady work of being and becoming. How do the Psalms help us “be” and “become?” How do the psalmists’ words and expression and example help us in this work of inner and spiritual movement? Here we turn to another way

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<sup>31</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*, (New York, NY: Harper One, 1991), 2.

of categorizing the psalms — only this time it is not according to their form or to their content. Rather, we look at them through their functional properties — what are the Psalms doing in and on our spiritual journeys of being and becoming?

Brueggemann's suggested typology of function<sup>32</sup> can help us explore this question. I've chosen to use Brueggemann's typological framework as the scaffolding for the curriculum largely because in the three categories (orientation, disorientation, reorientation), the modern worshipper can more easily recognize her or his own journey. The psalmist's own experiences of being securely oriented, disoriented, and newly oriented serve as a mirror. They reflect back to us the comfort of balance and stability, the fear and anxiety of being uprooted and/or disturbed, and the sense of peace and surprise at being in a new place. This framework very much attends to the pastoral space of the modern worshipper, but also honors and brings "into the now" the historical experiences of the psalmist. The categories allow for the experiences and emotions of the modern and ancient worshipper to overlap, inform each other, and speak to each other. Most importantly, Brueggemann's framework allows modern worshippers to see spiritual progress in the psalms. They are places — stop-offs — on the journey toward God. This framework presents the functionality of the Psalms in language that we can relate to in our current time — language that will help the modern worshipper more easily see movement — the slow process of "being and becoming."

Brueggemann admits that his framework moves away from analysis of form and setting and toward an analysis of function. In speaking to the benefits of this framework based on function, he writes that the function of a psalm might be to offer praise or to lament, but "such an

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 17 (1980), 3-32

answer stays in the realm of religion, where interpretation has stayed too long. However, to ask about function permits us to approach the matter from other, more pragmatic perspectives.”<sup>33</sup>

What is the function of the Psalms? (I think of my friend’s comment from the opening statements of this thesis: I don’t know what to do with the Psalms.) Brueggemann explains that “two purposes may be served by asking the question this way. First, it may advance our understanding of Israel’s intention in transmitting the Psalms. Second, it may help contemporary users to know more clearly what resources are available in the use of the Psalms and what may be ‘done’ in this ‘doing’ of them. I suggest a convergence of a contemporary pastoral agenda, together with a more historical exegetical interest.” This convergence, the pastoral meeting the historical, is precisely what this curriculum seeks to do. It seeks to bring the current needs of the modern preacher and the ancient experiences of the psalmists into the same room, if you will.

This framework, therefore, will be useful for this curriculum because it allows for current pastoral responses to evolve out of the historical, personal contexts of the psalmists. In other words, the psalmist’s poetic attempts to make sense of what was going on around them and within them will uncover, elucidate, and speak into the experiences of modern worshipper and preachers. What are the psalms “doing” in the lives of faithful people today? They reflect our own faithful, complicated, and often frustrating relationship to the God who is always calling us into and out of these various stages of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

This framework is helpful for preaching because it allows preachers to overlay the psalms onto the circumstances of their hearers so that the hearers can find themselves in one of the three particular spiritual states of being (oriented, disoriented, reoriented). As an example, I remember teaching a class on the Psalms to my congregation. The course was structured according to

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<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” 4.

Brueggemann's framework. One person came to me after the presentation and said she had never understood the spiritual value of the psalms, or how to use the psalms, until looking at them through this lens. "Why was this specific lens helpful?" I asked. The person was going through a divorce. Her life was once so settled and comfortable (orientation). Now, her life was very confusing and was turned "upside down" (disorientation). This framework allowed her to see her own life in relationship to the psalmist's life. She had new language to understand her own world, and it was language that had been used by many other faithful people on journeys that required trust and faith. This movement from orientation to disorientation and then to being newly oriented is a very useful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms, and a very useful way to relate to them as tools for prayer.

Brueggemann's framework is a way of allowing preachers to present the psalms as a point of contact between the modern and ancient worshipper who have each experienced times of stability, of instability, and times of new life. This curriculum will allow preachers to explore several psalms in each of Brueggemann's three categories, as well as explore the themes of the categories themselves. We now turn our attention to the three categories.

### Psalms of Orientation

Brueggemann describes Psalms of Orientation as "not the most interesting."<sup>34</sup> Such is the case with life when things are going well — we hardly notice. The psalms of orientation are those that speak to when the natural order of life is in place. Like the rising of the sun and its setting (Ps. 113:3), life is predictable and rhythmic; the psalmists can rely on a natural order. With regard to what God is "up to" in a place of orientation, God is taking care of the psalmist

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

and maintaining balance and equilibrium. The psalms that speak to periods of being securely oriented are Creation Psalms or other psalms that speak to orderliness. Brueggemann also places the Psalms of Ascent in this category as they “reflect domestic life which is in good order. They are the voice of genuine gratitude and piety for such rich blessings.”<sup>35</sup> As the woman in my congregation explained, before the divorce, her life was in good order. It was a place of knowing — a place of predictable familiarity. This is a nice place to be if only we stop to notice and appreciate it. This curriculum will offer preachers the opportunity to explore the themes of being securely oriented — of being certain of God’s presence and of knowing how God is present in the balance and rhythms of life. Examples of Psalms of Orientation:

- Wisdom, Psalm 1 (they are like trees planted by streams of water)
- Creation, Psalm 148 (Praise him, sun and moon)
- Ascent, Psalm 121 (I lift up my eyes to the hills)

### Psalms of Disorientation

Psalms of Disorientation describe a place in which “the old orientation has collapsed.”<sup>36</sup> What was familiar, known, expected, or assumed about life and about life with God has been turned upside down. This movement from orientation to disorientation reveals the “extremities of emotion.”<sup>37</sup> Paul Ricoeur, from whom Brueggemann draws inspiration for this framework, sees this movement as important in that it discloses the inadequacy of old, conventional language.<sup>38</sup> When the old world and the familiar ways of doing things are not around anymore, what do we

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 6.

do? The psalmists explore this question through their poems and songs. We might imagine the psalmist remembering and grieving more stable and predictable times. They reflect on what life was once like: “I pour out my soul when I think on these things.”<sup>39</sup> In this space of disorientation and loss, they cry: “How long, Lord? Have you forgotten us?”<sup>40</sup> In times of disorientation, the psalmist is also aware of enemies as they say to God, “Even now, they lie in wait for me.”<sup>41</sup> What does it feel like to feel forgotten, abandoned, or threatened? What does it feel like to have everything that you know taken away? What do we do when we are no longer in a place that feels like home? These are pastoral questions that our congregants have, but they do not always know how to put words or expression to them, nor do they necessarily know that there are ancient poets who have wrestled with these same questions. This curriculum will offer preachers the opportunity to explore the themes of being disoriented — of losing one’s footing and feeling abandoned by God. Examples of Psalms of Disorientation:

- Individual Lament/prayer for deliverance, Psalm 13 (How long, O Lord?)
- Communal Lament, Psalm 130 (Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord)
- Imprecatory/revenge/anger/blame, Psalm 137 (By the waters of Babylon)

### Psalms of Reorientation

After moving from a place of knowing, balance, and comfort and into a surprising place of dislocation and confusion, Brueggemann’s framework takes us to Psalms of Reorientation.

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<sup>39</sup> Ps. 42:4

<sup>40</sup> Ps. 13:1

<sup>41</sup> Ps. 59:3

“These psalms,” writes Brueggemann, “reflect a quite new circumstance which speaks of newness (it is not the old revived); surprise (there was no ground in the disorientation to anticipate it, and it is not automatic); and gift (it is not done by the lament).”<sup>42</sup> This third category truly is a place of providence and grace. Surely, neither the psalmist, nor the modern reader of the psalms *chooses* or *wishes* to move into a world of imbalance or disorientation. No one wishes to have her or his life turned upside down. But through this movement from one location to another, God does a new thing. In moving to a place of reorientation, God is not simply restoring what was; God has made it entirely new.

Two groupings of psalms characterize this space of new orientation: “Declarative hymns and thanksgiving songs do agree in the welcome and amazed recognition that a newness has been given which is not achieved, not automatic, not derived from the old, but is a genuine newness wrought by a gift.”<sup>43</sup> There is an element of “surprise and wonder, miracle, amazement when a new orientation has been granted to the disoriented for which there was no ground for expectation.”<sup>44</sup> This unexpected way of being is the gift to which Brueggemann refers, not because it is a request of the lament, but because it comes from God.<sup>45</sup> We cannot ask for that which we do not know we need. Instead the gift comes by God’s grace. God knows what we need, even if we don’t know we need it, and God is always in the process of moving us toward it. This curriculum will offer preachers the opportunity to explore the themes of being newly

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<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, “Psalms and the Life of Faith,” 9.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.

oriented — of finding oneself in a new space of being and restored knowledge of God. Examples of Psalms of Reorientation:

- Thanksgiving, Psalm 46 (God is our refuge . . . be still and know)
- Trust, Psalm 131 (O Lord, I am not proud)
- Praise, Psalm 126 (When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion)